

Study names 5 factors of social ills in energy, mining and logging communities

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The troubling link between boom towns and high rates of substance abuse is usually attributed to workers having too much money and too little to do. But a recent study of one Canadian community suggests underlying pressures including loneliness, a lack of healthy social connections and a need to “keep up with the Joneses”.

Two University of Alberta researchers, working with the Canadian Forest Service to conduct the study, found that substance abuse in the town of Hinton runs far deeper than the current economic boom. Because many resource-based communities have similar social and economic structures, the study’s findings may provide insights into the social challenges of mining, logging, and oil and gas-based communities across North America.

“What research in the town of Hinton has revealed is that the roots of substance abuse are deeply entrenched in the economic and social structure of the community,” said Angela C. Angell, co-author of the study and a master’s student in the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Agricultural, Life & Environmental Sciences.

In 2006, the researchers interviewed 108 people living and working in Hinton.

The interviews, which included forest, mining and oil and gas workers, medical personnel, RCMP officers, seniors, students and people recovering from addictions, identified five common factors that

contribute to social breakdown:

- 1) people of high and low incomes are separated by socially tight-knit groups;
- 2) high incomes lead to a “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality, which produces subsequent financial stress and less time for family;
- 3) transient workers are prone to alcohol and drug use due to loneliness;
- 4) shift work leaves workers exhausted and disrupts family routines and relationships;
- 5) a union environment, coupled with high incomes, leads to a “culture of entitlement” among some workers who feel that there are no consequences to their actions, including the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

The study recommends that industry and major employers need to promote healthy lifestyles and not turn a blind eye to substance-abuse issues among their current or would-be employees.

“Governments also need to earmark funds and programs to meet the unique social and economic challenges of resource-based communities,” said John Parkins, a professor of rural economy at the University of Alberta and co-author of the study. This funding should include regional, rural-based drug treatment centres, he added.

Source: University of Alberta

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